**Afroasiatic: Fresh insights from an "old" language family**

INTRODUCTION

# Afroasiatic

## Fresh insights from an "old" language family

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This volume contains a selection of papers originally presented at the 14th Italian Meeting on Afroasiatic Linguistics in Turin (15–18 June, 2011). They have been selected in order to give the interested reader an updated (although by necessity incomplete) comparative view of all branches of Afroasiatic and of the breadth of theoretical and empirical research being carried on. The articles are intended therefore to be representative of a whole gamut of interests which focus on Afroasiatic, from the presentation of new data, often from scarcely known varieties (be it Semitic – as in the case of the Kordofanian Baggara Arabic – Berber, or Chadic) to a sophisticated linguistic analysis of old debates (such as the value of the Classical Arabic verbal forms).

We have grouped the articles into three broad areas of interest: the family as such, in its classificatory but also typological aspects; the analysis of the intricate morphology of Afroasiatic and its developments; and syntax in a wide sense, from the clause to the sentence and beyond. Many years ago, Hans-Jürgen Sasse remarked how Semitic linguistics developed a strong typological orientation very early, to the detriment of reconstruction, and he lamented the fact that the concept of Semitic appears to be more of a typological than a genetic unit in the eyes of many scholars (Sasse 1981: 131); in those very same years, Sasse published his still unsurpassed reconstruction of East Cushitic phonology (Sasse 1979). While we do not engage in this work on phonological reconstruction, classification and reconstruction play a big role, especially in the first part of the book.

The volume opens with Helmut Satzinger's article on the syntactic alignment of the protolanguage. It is also the only contribution specifically addressing Proto-Afroasiatic, and this is all the more interesting as work at the macro-family level has been at a standstill for many years now. Interest in the marked nominative character of Afroasiatic has instead been revived in recent years, with König (2006) and especially Frajzyngier & Mettouchi (2013), who expanded and corrected Sasse's (1984) seminal work on the Afroasiatic case. On the basis of a thorough

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analysis of the pronominal series of the different family groups, Satzinger's conclusion is that a nominative-absolutive alignment can still be reconstructed for all the families of Afroasiatic with the exception of Semitic. Satzinger notices how "the nominative-accusative one is the most widely spread among all languages, followed by the ergative-absolutive alignment. The nominative-absolutive alignment is extremely rare in comparison". The author hypothesizes that "[T]he nominative-absolutive alignment of Afroasiatic may be as old as Proto-Afroasiatic, or it may have developed from an ergative-absolutive alignment" while Semitic nominative-accusative is a later development "from the Afroasiatic nominative-absolutive alignment, as it still contains conspicuous remnants of it".

Classificatory problems and methodologies lie at the core of Petr Zemánek's "The Limits and Potentials of Cladistics in Semitic". The author explores the possibility of using grammar data only in the construction of a phylogenetic tree of Semitic and its visualization as NeighborNet networks, and he does so using lists of grammatical features by Faber (1997), by Gai (1994), and by himself. The results, though mixed, are promising: areality plays a big and possibly disturbing role, with four areas: Mesopotamia, Syro-Palestine, South Arabia, and Ethiopia. The position of Arabic within the Central Semitic group is confirmed and given new strength, while the results are less clear-cut in the case of Modern South Arabian. In general, the languages of the Arabian Peninsula (with the exception of Arabic, which consistently points more to the North than to the South) show an "unstable behavior".

The necessity to integrate grammatical markers and the lexicon is recognized by Zemánek; in the following article, "Lexical Evidence for Ethiosemitic, its Subgroups, and Borrowing", Grover Hudson builds upon his recent volume (Hudson 2013) on the lexicon of the Semitic languages of the Horn of Africa (variously called Ethiosemitic, Afrosemitic, or Northeast African Semitic) to further elaborate on their internal classification on the basis of their lexical stock. The author uses a time-honored (and much criticized) lexicostatistical framework (both on the basis of a 98-word list and a longer 250-word list), but enriching it with a sophisticated analysis of internal borrowing. His results show that Hetzron's (1972) internal classification of Ethiosemitic, although basically confirmed, needs revision in a few lower-level branches. The problems concentrate, as might be expected, within the tightly-knit cluster of the Gurage languages, and they prompt the author to propose a revised classification. Another important result of the study goes much beyond internal classificatory problems, insofar as it provides "helpful quantification of, and little support for, the traditional idea that ES (Ethiosemitic) has been unusually influenced by Agaw". In the light of the commonly held view (cf. Thomason & Kaufman 1988), which sees in Ethiosemitic an example of extreme contact-induced change, Hudson's results, although limited to basic vocabulary, cannot be easily dismissed. They further seem to go hand in hand with recent work

on the shared features of the languages of the Horn, which, after Tosco's (2000) critique of Ferguson's (1976) establishment of Ethiopia as a language area, has seen a recent resurgence of studies on more regional language areas (as already in Sasse 1986 for the Dullay-Konsoid – and partially Omotic – interaction in southwest Ethiopia) or fine-grained analyses of common grammatical features and developments (as in Crass & Meyer 2007).

The second part of the volume delves on the morphosyntax of specific Afroasiatic varieties; this section opens with Michal Marmorstein's "Reconsidering the 'perfect'–'imperfect' Opposition in the Classical Arabic Verbal System". The author successfully copes with a discussion as ancient as Arabic studies – the 'core' value of the verbal forms. Through a thorough analysis of the use of the two paradigms in different syntactic environments, their compatibility with different particles, word-order facts (with the opposition between the verbal and the nominal clause), lexical classes, and textual domains, Marmorstein shows that the opposition between perfect *faʿala* and imperfect *yafʿalu* is not obtained in any environment and, where it does, it serves to indicate several semantic distinctions. Often, the opposition applies between *faʿala*, on the one hand, and not only *yafʿalu*, but also *qad faʿala* and the participle on the other. The author concludes that the complexity of the system, which, besides *faʿala* and *yafʿalu*, consists of many other forms, cannot be reduced to a single temporal or aspectual dichotomy and a single label or 'core value'.

Morphological change lies at the heart of Mena Lafkioui's "The Imperfective in Berber: Evidence of Innovated Forms and Functions", which analyzes developments in the Berber verbal system with a focus on innovations in the North (Tarifit of Northern Morocco) and the South (Tuareg). The core of the argument is that mutual or external contact can safely be excluded: changes were system-internal and driven mainly by functional parameters and the morphological expression of pragmatic or semantic distinctions (such as habituality for punctual verbs and durative/intensive values with non-punctual verbs).

The second contribution on Berber is Catherine Taine-Cheikh's "*Condition, Interrogation, and Exception: Remarks on Particles in Berber*", which offers both an overview and a detailed analysis of the particles used to express condition in different Berber languages. Areal convergence and variation is observed, and different grammaticalization paths are detailed. Convergence is detected in five regions of the Berber domain, and this may be expressed with a classical wave propagation model. Semantic convergence is found in the frequent connection of the particles introducing conditionals with those used in interrogative clauses and those expressing exception. The author remarks on how Berber brings evidence for three well-known different patterns for the grammaticalization of conditional particles (namely, from a copula, a marker of polar questions, and a temporal marker).

Stefano Manfredi, in "The Semantics of Modals in Kordofanian Baggara Arabic", brings us to a largely unknown Sudanese Arabic dialect. Kordofanian Baggara Arabic follows Eastern Arabic dialects in its use of *b(i)=* with imperfective verbal forms when non-modal and in its absence from modal contexts. The paper aims at drawing a polysemantic account of modal auxiliaries in light of the participant-oriented approach proposed by van der Auwera & Plugian (1998). We find in this dialect the morphologization of *bukūn* "he will" from the 3SG.M imperfective form of the verb 'be' preceded by preverbal *b(i)=* (**b=i-kūn* "he is, he will be") and its grammaticalization to the expression of epistemic necessity ('must'): this fully conforms to the path 'future' > 'epistemic necessity' proposed by van der Auwera & Plungian. But Kordofanian Baggara Arabic also displays a semantic specification from general participant-external possibility to deontic possibility rather than a semantic generalization the other way round. As is often the case, one is reminded here of the inherent weakness of too many typological generalizations, which are often based upon insufficient data sets.

The clause, the sentence, and the text are the focus of the last section, which opens with Olga Kapeliuk's "Insubordination in Modern South Arabian: A Common Isogloss with Ethiosemitic?" The South Arabian and Ethiosemitic type of insubordination addressed here is found in the common use of imperfect or perfect verbal forms, subordinated by the relative particle *ḏ-* and acting as main verbs. Following an insight by Pennacchietti (1993), this insubordinate use is interpreted in Modern South Arabian as implying the presence of a zero copula, while an overt copula is always present in the corresponding Ethiosemitic examples. The neat parallel between the Semitic languages on both sides of the Red Sea forces Kapeliuk to question the role of the Cushitic substrate in the very shaping of Ethiosemitic. The reader is immediately reminded of the low number of Cushitic loanwords in the basic vocabulary of Ethiosemitic discussed earlier in this volume by Hudson, and with the latter's remark against the traditional and commonly-held hypothesis one should in Ethiosemitic "a secondary population in northeast Africa". Obviously, this tallies well with the frequently noted fact that linguistic diversity within Afroasiatic in the Horn of Africa is so great that this area could well be the cradle of the whole family.

Geographically akin is Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle's "Possessive and Genitive Constructions in Dahālik (Ethiosemitic)". A common feature of Modern South Arabian and Dahalik is the restriction and possible fossilization of the Semitic Construct State (the direct annexation of the possessum followed by the possessee, which can be determined). This, of course, is just another instance of a trend widely attested in Semitic, and in Ethiosemitic in particular. Following again another attested tendency, we witness the rise of an 'analytic' construction with a relator between the two terms. The relator itself takes different forms (much as it

happens with the analytical genitives of Spoken Arabic, and against the unitary treatment of *d-* or *-d* in Aramaic) and is generally in use for alienable possession. Soqotri is highly original in having the analytic construction only with pronominal possession, and with the reversed order Poss N.

Eran Cohen's "The Characterization of Conditional Patterns in Old Babylonian Akkadian" investigates the use of the connective particle *=ma* in conditional clauses in Old Babylonian. *=ma* creates an asymmetrical connection between two clauses which show otherwise what Cohen calls a "modal congruence". The syntactic patterns investigated by the author are examples of those paratactic conditionals which by definition are seemingly devoid of specific characterization as conditionals and in which the connective does not contribute any specific meaning. Syntactic and semantic features of the paratactic construction having conditional value are singled out and compared with the markedly different paratactic circumstantial construction. A sound description of this specific domain of Akkadian syntax is presented by Cohen as an important step toward the cross-linguistic understanding of paratactic conditional patterns. ~~Typology must rely upon reliable data and their correct structural interpretation within the linguistic system to which they belong~~.

In "Locative Predication in Chadic: Implications for Linguistic Theory", Zygmunt Frajzyngier provides a detailed account of locative expressions in languages belonging to Central, West, and East Chadic, in order to demonstrate locative predication as a category in Proto-Chadic. In general, if the clause does not have an inherently locative predicate, a locative predicator is used, or a serial verb construction, or still other means. For a non-inherently locative complement, a generic locative preposition is used. Frajzyngier details the presence of locative predicators (defined as "a predicate whose sole function is to serve as a locative predicate when the predicate of the clause is not inherently locative and the clause aims to convey the locative predication") in all three branches of Chadic. In so doing, he further proves that elements such as Hausa and Mupun *a* are not prepositions but locative predicators, and can arrive at an independent, not contact-induced explanation of the presence of serial verb constructions in a language such as Lele with non-inherently locative verbs. Frajzyngier finally postulates the presence of a locative predicate in Proto-Chadic on the reasoning that "it is less likely that languages from three branches have independently grammaticalized locative prediction, which is otherwise typologically rare, than the possibility that some languages from each branch have retained a function from the Proto-Chadic".

Shlomo Izre'el's contribution is much more than its name implies. "Unipartite Clauses: A View from Spoken Israeli Hebrew" is a neat, coherent presentation of a revolutionary approach to the 'sentence' in spoken human language. Building on his previous paper (Izre'el 2012), and recognizing his debt to much French linguistic thought (foremost to Tesnière), the author defines a sentence as a unit consisting

minimally of a predicate. Unipartite sentences, which are the object of the article, consist of a predicate only. They convey new information and carry sentential information load and modality. The plethora of one-word utterances so common in spontaneous spoken language and usually regarded as elliptical, reduced or concise syntactic structures, are finally given their proper status as full-fledged sentences in Izre'el's account. This is done on the basis of their intonational behavior, as they build intonation groups (or units) of their own. Building on the *Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew*, Izre'el further proposes a thorough classification of unipartite sentences, starting from their status as anchored ("in referential expressions beyond the sentence domain") or unanchored, and he exemplifies possible types. This brief synopsis barely hints at the enormous potential of Izre'el's theory if and when it is tested on other languages, as suggested by the author himself in his conclusions.

In "The Interaction of State, Prosody, and Linear Order in Kabyle (Berber): Grammatical Relations and Information Structure", Amina Mettouchi ideally connects to Frajzyngier's chapter in assuming a strong non-aprioristic view of grammar and with Izre'el's chapter in her attention to prosodic structures; the author successfully brings together information structure, prosody, and morphosyntax, showing that

> (a) the state opposition in itself does not mark grammatical relations; (b) coreference in gender and number between the noun and the bound pronoun, in itself, is not transparent for the encoding of grammatical relations; (c) word order in itself does not mark grammatical relations. However, the interaction of state, word order, and prosodic grouping allows the computation of grammatical relations for nouns.

Functions are therefore marked by the interaction of a plurality of coding jointly marking a value.

The Afroasiatic language family is in many aspects unique: more than Indo-European, it brings together a minority of languages whose records date from the beginnings of written history, languages with a unique time-span of continuous data, encompassing at times several millennia (such as Egyptian and Aramaic) and, on the other hand, a bewildering number of still scarcely investigated languages, all too often spoken by dwindling communities (as is the case of much of Chadic). The balance between these two extremes is difficult to strike: data, methodologies, and the whole mind frames of the specialists are too often different.

It is no surprise, therefore, that this brief overview does not do justice to the richness of the volume: but its sheer amount of otherwise unknown or scarcely accessible data, and of mind-provoking concepts and insights, is there, an apt reminder of how much still lies ahead waiting for discovery and appraisal in this, at the same time oldest and very new, language family.

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